“PRISON PADRES”

“I was in prison, and you visited me,” said Jesus. These chaplains came to visit and decided to stay.

by Becky Beane

ON A STEAMY SOUTHERN WEEKEND IN SEPTEMBER, an inmate at a state prison hanged himself in his cell. Word of the suicide swept through the 1,500-inmate prison, spewing a gamut of feelings in its wake. Grief. Shock. Anger at the “system.” Fear of one’s own vulnerability to despair in a disparaging environment.

“When you see an inmate commit suicide, you realize that he saw himself in a hopeless situation,” says Chaplain Gary Pearce, senior chaplain at Dixon Correctional Institute in Jackson, Louisiana. “That’s very disappointing, because it means that no one got to him to share the hope in our hearts and lives. Or if we did, we didn’t do a good enough job.”

In any prison “there are a lot of broken vessels,” explains colleague Ray Anderson, senior chaplain of David Wade Correctional Center in northwest Louisiana. So even cups of cold water—a word of encouragement, a strengthening hand on the shoulder, a caring smile—may seep through the cracks.

“I try to promote dignity, self-respect, and putting something back in the lives of these men who are made in the image of God,” adds Anderson. “Then they go back out in the yard, in an environment they feel is designed to strip away every shred of dignity. So it’s a constant struggle. And it’s heart-breaking to see people who have no hope.”

Then there are the other ones—the inmates who thirst and drink in the offerings of new possibilities. The ones who find not simply a self-serving “jail-house religion” but God. The ones who leave prison as different men from the ones who came in.

Chaplain Robbie Strong has known several such men during his eight years of ministry in two Louisiana prisons. “I’ll be walking through the parking lot of Wally World” — Strong’s pet name for the local Wal-Mart—“and I’ll hear ‘Hey, Chap!’ And behold, it’s an ex-inmate who’s been out a year and tells me he’s doing well, has a job, is back with his family, attached to a church. That’s a great reward!”

AGENTS OF CHANGE

HISTORICALLY, PRISONS in the United States gave considerable weight to the spiritual side of an inmate’s rehabilitation, and thus to the role of a spiritual overseer. The first U.S. prison, instigated by Philadelphia Quakers in 1790, focused unabashedly on motivating the offender to turn to God in confession and repentance (hence the name penitentiary: “house of penitence”). Inmates received a Bible and time to reflect on it, sequestered from the distractions and temptations of the outside world.

Even as the nature of prisons changed into the 1800s, prison chaplains retained great respect and influence. Besides leading worship services and offering inmates spiritual direction, they also organized the first prison libraries and educational courses, and developed programs to help released prisoners move successfully back into their communities.

In the mid-1960s, prison chaplains found an admirer in Japanese penologist Masahura Yanagimoto, who evaluated and wrote on U.S. prisons. He contended that "institutions having social workers and psychologists, but no chaplains, are worse than the ones with chaplains and no social workers and psychologists."

In recent years, however, society's over-all marginalization of religion has diminished the status of prison chaplains. In many states, tightened budget belts have squeezed their numbers as well. Colorado, for example, terminated all of its state-paid prison chaplains; religious activities—holding on by virtue of the First Amendment—are now conducted by volunteers or privately funded chaplains.

"Some people say, 'Get rid of the chaplains; we don't need them,' " says Burl Cain, warden of Louisiana's notorious Angola prison, a high-security facility housing more than 5,000 prisoners. "That would be the dumbest thing we could do!"

The only truly successful rehabilitation of prisoners is "moral rehabilitation," Cain stresses to the roomful of Louisiana prison chaplains seated before him at their annual Leadership Development and Planning Retreat. He used to say "religious" rehabilitation, he adds, until he got "clipped" by his secular critics. "You are the most special people we have in corrections," he adds, giving them the same advice his mother gave him when he became a warden: "You have an opportunity to change many lives. Don't miss this opportunity."

A CHAP OF ALL TRADES

GREAT OPPORTUNITIES seldom come without great challenges. A chaplain serves long hours as pastor to the inmate church, missionary to an enclosed "city" of highly diverse residents, minister to the prison staff, coordinator of a wide spectrum of faith-group activities and volunteers, liaison between the inmates and staff, counselor to inmates in crisis (and in the confining prison environment, even "little" problems take on crisis proportions), and—when it comes to dealing with religious rights—a quasi-paralegal. "Sometimes I feel I spend as much time in the law books as I do in the Bible!" Anderson reveals, only half-jokingly. And with all this comes the endless river of paperwork intrinsic to a strictly regimented bureaucracy. Chaplains also battle an array of stereo-types from different fronts. Many inmates eye them suspiciously as colluders with the "system." Some security officers view them as bleeding hearts whose "unnecessary" religious activities burden them with extra guard duty. Christians "on the street"—outside the prison walls—often assume chaplains are "ministerial washouts" who could not make it in "real" church ministry.

That last distorted image particularly frustrates them. Chaplains know you have to have a special calling from God to endure the rigors of prison ministry and to see prisoners with Christ's compassion. And as certified members of the Louisiana Chaplains Association, Chaplains Anderson, Pearce, and Strong have all met established requirements that include earning a master of divinity degree from an accredited seminary, completing courses in clinical pastoral education (intensive training in counseling people with severe emotional and behavioral problems), and demonstrating professional competence in pastoral care.

Ray Anderson and Robbie Strong both do double duty as full-time prison chaplains and church pastors, albeit of small congregations. On Sundays Strong begins with a worship service at Avoyelles Correctional Center in Cottonport, then hops in his pick-up truck and drives 20 miles to lead the service at his Evangelical Methodist Church in Simmesport. Afterward it's back to prison for counseling time and paperwork. Then back to his church for the evening service. And that's just the first day of the week.

Anderson similarly toggles between Wade Correctional Center and his 100-member Church of Christ in Homer, which he has pastored for seven years. He and other church members started going into prison as volunteers, leading a Sunday service twice a month. In 1997, after 16 months of volunteering, the pastor said yes to Wade's offer of a staff position.

"I just think of it as one ministry, one profession," says Anderson. "Being the servant of God."

It helps that his three children are grown and his wife fully supports his double ministry. As part of the church team, "she came on board as a [prison] volunteer so she could spend time with me in my work," recalls Anderson, "and she fell in love with the ministry, too! So it's a family thing."

RULES AND REGRETS

ONE OF THE HARDEST responsibilities of a prison chaplain, says Anderson, "is finding the best way to break the worst news"—that a loved one on the outside has died. Last year he personally delivered nearly 80 death notices to prisoners at Wade. "There's no easy way to tell an inmate he's lost his mother"—sometimes the only person who has stuck by him during his incarceration. "It's hard to hear the sobs."

If the funeral is in state, prisoners cleared by security may attend—shackled, handcuffed, and under guard. Even if a prisoner is willing to do that, others may not want him there. And if the funeral is out of state, the prisoner can't go at all—even if, as in one Wade prisoner's case, it's only a 30-minute drive across the state line.

If a family member is terminally ill, a prisoner may then have the excruciating choice of being furloughed to visit before the person dies or waiting to say final good-byes at the funeral. He can't do both.

Such situations are "very traumatic for some," says Anderson. "They are in an environment where shedding tears is often viewed as being weak, so the chapel may be the only safe haven they have to vent their emotions. And it's one of our hardships to have to explain policies and procedures in the midst of trying to help them deal with their grief."

"Sometimes one of the hardest things to do is enforce the rules," admits Pearce, his eyes tearing up from sudden memories. "'Why can't I go?' And all I can say is it's the rules, and there's nothing I can do about it."

"Except try to understand his hurt," adds Anderson. And sometimes he has to remind an angry inmate that "you're the reason you're suffering this right now. You broke the law. When you run the time clock backwards, where was the point that put you in this situation that I'm now apologizing for?"

It's part of the "tough love" aspect of being a prison chaplain, says Pearce. "Like a velvet-covered brick."

MINISTER TO ALL

PRISON CHAPLAINS are tasked with meeting the spiritual needs of all inmates, and that means providing "free exercise" access to followers of other faiths as well—even those doctrinally discordant with Christianity: Muslim, Buddhist, Native American, Wiccan, and so forth. "Those are the rules," they point out, and while some admit they "don't always like" having to make provision for some groups, they don't believe they compromise their Christian convictions.

"God has given everyone a free moral choice, and I respect that," says Chaplain Robbie Strong. "If I didn't, that would make me no more than someone who wants to control and manipulate others, and that's not what God is about. I have to respect the inmates' choices and live before them the way God wants me to live."

"As prison chaplains we have to be careful not to promote our own beliefs over other religions by trying to curtail what others believe," adds Chaplain Anderson. "But I see in the Bible that Paul was a man who didn't expect people to violate their own conscience. On Mars Hill he looked around at all the idols and told the people he saw they were religious in every way. And then he took the opportunity to share about Christ. I can share my beliefs; I can share what the Bible says about Jesus." He just can't say another group's beliefs are wrong. "I let inmates draw their own conclusions."

In actuality, the percentage of religious inmates following non-Christian religions remains small. According to a 1998 survey conducted by Corrections Compendium, of those inmates reporting a religious preference, more than half (51 percent) identified themselves as Protestant, about 15 percent Roman Catholic, and less than 5 percent Muslim. Native Americans constitute a significant proportion only in Arizona and South Dakota. Various other groups claim mere fractions of a percentage.

But while the percentage of "reported" Christians seems significant, those who attend worship services and other religious activities make up only 15 to 20 percent of the entire prison population. What troubles the chaplains is the vast majority of prisoners whom chapel programs never touch.

"That's been one of my biggest burdens since I got here," says Chaplain Pearce, who transferred to Dixon a little over two years ago after nearly nine years in a juvenile facility. "We're working hard to find what it takes to reach into the broader population." Pearce and his colleagues batted that issue around during a brainstorm session at the Chaplain's Leadership Retreat, organized by PF Louisiana at the Department of Corrections' request. "We need to walk the yard more"—mingling with the general prison population. But chaplains are already crunched for time, and volunteers—for security reasons—can't mix casually among the prisoners apart from scheduled, monitored activities. "We could have more 'general appeal' programs"—Anderson, for example, would like to offer a class on fathering from prison. But then they risk crossing into the "turf" of the mental-health or educational staff. "We need to make better use of our inmate resources"—such as equipping prisoners to take more initiative in organizing Bible studies. Except many prisons—again for security reasons—forbid inmates to take leadership roles.

But creative thinking has spawned new opportunities. At Dixon, Pearce launched a 10-week course based on Stephen Covey's bestseller The Seven Habits of Highly Effective People, "which I Christianized with biblical references," he says. "The guys did some serious thinking"—about their values, their beliefs, their purpose in life. "I think it's one of the best programs we do, and it reaches beyond Christian circles. So I feel we're able to share some life-changing principles and touch the lives of inmates who would never come to church."

At Wade, Anderson joined with the district attorney's office two years ago to develop a project that spurs inmates to accept responsibility for their crimes, understand their victims' suffering, and take steps to make amends (see side bar, page 9).

The chaplains also look forward to the potential impact of Operation Starting Line, introduced to them at the retreat. OSL, a grand-scale collaborative effort of Prison Fellowship and several other ministries, is especially designed to attract the unchurched prison crowd through upbeat Christian musicians, athletes, entertainers, and speakers. OSL events are slated for all Louisiana prisons in late September.

THE VALUE OF VOLUNTEERS

OSL WILL BRING WITH IT a host of new well-trained PF volunteers, many of whom are expected to continue with ongoing prison ministry after the fall events.

“We couldn’t do our ministry without volunteers; our arms aren’t long enough,” says Pearce, whose chaplaincy team includes one other full-time and three part-time chaplains. “The ones we can’t directly reach, the volunteers may.”

“Volunteers are my lifeline,” affirms Anderson, who coordinates schedules for some 250 of them. “Sometimes inmates will look at us as ‘you’re paid; you have to be here.’ So I could give them advice and they take it with a grain of salt because they figure I’m paid to say it. And then a volunteer can come in behind me and say the same thing, and the inmates take it as gospel because the volunteer ‘wants’ to be there.”

Volunteers may lead Bible studies, seminars, worship services, prayer groups; visit lockdown units, where inmates can’t get out for group activities; mentor inmates one-to-one. Security and space decree the boundaries; unfortunately, a combination of inmate overload and staff shortages has forced many prisons to cut programming—of all kinds—in turn forcing both religious and secular groups to compete for coveted schedule vacancies. Sometimes the prison will cancel a religious activity at the last minute to make room for something else.

But that’s one test to determine the good volunteers: They love the inmates—enough to weather the unexpected twists and turns and security demands of prison ministry. They also obey the rules.

The greatest dearth of volunteer ministry shows up in aftercare, the three Louisiana chaplains agree—individual Christians or churches to help inmates prepare for release, then come alongside them from the time they walk out through the pressurized adjustment period. “The inmate needs clothes, he needs a job, he needs transportation, he needs a support system,” says Robbie Strong. “And if that man does not get those things, he will likely return to what he was doing before”—to familiar but unfavorable companions and pastimes.

“We would never expect a toddler to win a marathon,” adds Anderson. “And by the same token, if we turn a man loose with very few resources, he is not going to be successful with what he is trying to do. We need follow-up programs and assistance, especially from the churches.”

Again, chaplains are finding a partner in PF—organizing Network for Life service groups to provide resources and a church connection to newly released prisoners.

But it’s not only the distinctly Christian groups in Louisiana that are seeking the help of churches in keeping released prisoners on the straight and narrow track. The opening speaker at the chaplains’ retreat was Jannitta Antoine, deputy secretary of the state’s

Department of Public Safety and Corrections. She and another staffer have been contacting churches on their own to solicit their help in aftercare. She also called on the chaplains to consider ways to reach out to children of prisoners—and stop them from following their parents to prison.

Antoine's comments may signal a revival of respect for prison chaplains. "If we are going to make a difference with faith-based programs, this is the year," she said. "The community wants it, politicians seem to want it, and there is money for it."

While chaplains would certainly relish extra funding and opportunities for ministry, they will make the most of whatever resources they are given to fulfill God's call: Offering hope and healing to prison's broken vessels.

Sidebar:

KEEPERS OF THE CLOAK

ON A BITTERLY COLD DAY in fourth-century France, a young soldier named Martin noticed a near-naked beggar shivering by the city gate, ignored by other passersby. Moved with compassion, Martin took his sword and slashed his own cloak in two, giving one part to the beggar.

That night Martin dreamed Christ came to him wrapped in the beggar's half of the cloak. "As you did it to one of the least of these my brethren," Jesus echoed Matthew 25:40, "you did it to me."

That dream spurred Martin to entrust his life to Christ and resign from the army to serve wholeheartedly as a "soldier of God." After his death, Martin of Tours was canonized by the Catholic Church.

Saint Martin's half-cloak, known in Latin as a cappa, was reportedly enshrined; the word for that shrine—cappella—eventually evolved into our English word chapel. The word chaplain literally means "keeper of the cloak."

The title befits the men and women who, in the nature of Martin of Tours, bring comfort and hope to modern society's "least of these"—the banished outcasts of prison. Just as Martin recognized Jesus in the beggar, prison chaplains recognize—and serve—Him in the inmates. "I was naked and you clothed me . . . I was in prison and you came to me" (Matthew 25:36).

Sidebar:

THINKING ABOUT THE VICTIMS

"I WANT TO DO AS MUCH AS I CAN TO GIVE BACK TO THOSE I HURT."

At the time, Chaplain Ray Anderson didn't have much guidance to offer the prison lifer sitting in his office. But the inmate's genuine longing to make amends to his crime victims started the chaplain thinking—and sparked the creation of a truly life-changing program at David Wade Correctional Center in Homer, Louisiana.

The Restorative Justice Project, launched in January 1999, focuses on increasing offenders' sense of accountability for their crimes, sensitizing them to the depth of injury and loss their crime victims have suffered, and helping them realize that "they hold a key for their victims to get on with their lives," Anderson explains.

In a criminal case, he continues, "the state often sets the victims off to the side with the attitude 'We'll take care of the problem, we'll get the criminal convicted, we'll send him to jail, and justice will be done.' But for victims, nothing has been restored. They are still asking, 'Why did he do it?' They still have questions that they need answered so they can move on with their lives."

The RJ Project helps the inmates provide some of those answers.

Anderson partnered with Louisiana victims' advocate Melissa Kater and Alternatives to Violence program volunteer Linda Grayson to develop a 20-session, 50-hour course that leads the inmates through an earnest in-depth examination. They explore experiences that shaped their own attitudes and behaviors, the extent of the trauma they inflicted on their victims, the meaning and process of forgiveness (from the perspective of different faith groups), and reactions they might expect from victims in seeking to make amends. The inmates listened to lectures and panel discussions, participated in group discussions, kept personal journals that they shared with the rest of the group, watched videos of victim-offender dialogues, and faced a live panel of victims (not their own) who candidly bared their pain and suffering.

Twelve inmates completed the full pilot project. "There were noticeable changes in the group," wrote Grayson in her post-evaluation. She saw a distinct shift "from what they wanted for themselves (forgiveness) to what they wanted for the victims (peace and healing)."

One inmate wrote, "It hurts more, knowing what I did, because I understand better the results of my actions."

Another discovered "the choices I make can impact and change people's lives for better or worse. If a negative impact causes so much damage, then imagine what a positive one can do."

The course ended with each inmate writing a letter to his victim—taking responsibility for the harm he caused, explaining as best he could the "why" behind the crime, expressing a new understanding of what he'd put the victim through, and asking forgiveness. Each letter was critiqued by other group members and leaders—and revised as needed—"because the last thing we want to do is re-offend someone by hurtful or inappropriate words," Anderson stresses.

Completed letters were filed with the victims' advocacy office, which notified the victims about the letters and asked if they wanted to receive them. Some victims agreed to receive the letters. So far, none have asked for a face-to-face meeting with their offenders.

In early 2001 a new group of Wade inmates will commence the next Restorative Justice Project. Similar projects have spread to other Louisiana prisons.

Inmates receive no special recognition for completing the course, Anderson stresses. "Nothing goes in their files" to help boost their chances for an early release.

"This isn't about them," he adds. "They don't benefit, except internally. It helps them to admit that 'yes, I did a terrible thing, and I'm man enough now to accept what I did and try to make it as right as possible.' And that gives them some inward dignity and self-respect that I think is an essential initial step to rehabilitation.

"But the greatest part of this project, we hope, is that the victims will be allowed to move forward in their lives, to a much greater capacity than they could before."

Chaplains, correctional officials, or victims' advocates interested in more information may contact Chaplain Ray Anderson (in writing please) at David Wade Correctional Center, 670 Bell Hill Road, Homer, LA 71040.